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ABSTRACT

This research summary examines the policies and issues that affect the school dropout problem among youth with disabilities. It clarifies the dropout problem, examines government and school policies that affect school holding power, and recommends responses. Information is based on a current dropout prevention research project, findings from five national education databases that include dropout statistics, and results of selected school district and university studies. The policy research brief explains that the dropout problem is particularly great among youth with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities. It examines the effects of dropping out of school and describes conceptual models for understanding the school dropout problem. Two initiatives at the federal level which directly address the dropout problem are discussed: the establishment of a national goal regarding graduation rates, and mandated reporting requirements to ascertain the extent of the dropout problem. Four school policies that are prone to being exclusionary in practice are identified: discipline procedures, attendance and grade retention policies, academic standards, and failure to establish home-schoc collaboration. Dropout prevention strategies for special education students are described, such as a risk factor monitoring and school engagement procedure. Six policy recommendations are presented. (Contains 48 references.) (JDD)

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Policy Research Brief

CENTER ON
RESIDENTIAL SERVICES
AND COMMUNITY LIVING
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Are We Pushing Students in Special Education to Drop Out of School?

This Policy Research Brief examines the policies and issues that affect the school dropout problem among youth with disabilities. It seeks to clarify the dropout problem, examine government and school policies that affect school holding power (ability to retain students), and recommend responses. The information presented here is based on the authors' current dropout prevention applied research project, findings from the five primary national education databases that include dropout statistics (i.e., National Longitudinal Transition Study, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Common Core of Data, High School and Beyond, Current Population Survey), and the results of selected school district and university studies. This Policy Research Brief was prepared by Mary F. Sinclair, Sandra L. Christenson, Martha L. Thurlow, and David L. Evelo of the Partnership for School Success dropout prevention project, a collaborative project of the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota and the Minneapolis Public Schools.

■ Introduction

Michael* is a middle school student with a disability. He and his parents have recently been in and out of a homeless shelter and are presently in temporary housing - address unknown. While Michael has a history of being truant, the school was not aware of his current residential problems. At first, staff only recognized that he was absent. Michael's monitor enlisted the efforts of a local truancy program to pick up Michael and bring him to school. The bus driver found no one at home. Michael's monitor also made subsequent home visits, again to find the house empty and the telephone disconnected. Neighbors did not seem to know where the family was. A week later, Michael showed up at school. His monitor and the school social worker then learned from Michael that he was living at the shelter.

The next day at school, Michael's monitor noticed him sitting in the office with a referral for suspension from the physical education (PE) teacher. The referral noted that Michael had neglected to bring his gym clothes and failed to acknowledge that he had done anything wrong. The referral also indicated that the PE teacher had given Michael after-school detention for past offenses, but Michael never showed up for detention. On that same day, Michael's monitor spoke with one of the assistant principals and emphatically pleaded that out-of school suspension for having no gym clothes was an inappropriate consequence for a boy who was living in a shelter, who barely attended school to begin with, and who has a disability that affects his education. The assistant principals concurred after being made aware of the situation. In addition to planning with school administrators, Michael and his monitor wrote a contract intended to get Michael back in the habit of going to school. The contract stated that Michael would receive a reward of his choice in return for increased attendance.

The next day, the PE teacher referred Michael to the office again because he refused to dress. The referral indicated that Michael had called the teacher a name, used inappropriate language, never attended class, and that when he did attend class he did not have gym clothes. The teacher requested that in accordance with PE and district policy, Michael be suspended for three days. Michael was suspended, but not by the assistant principals. While both assistant principals were aware of the problem and were willing to explore alternative solutions, the unexpected happened: Michael was suspended by a nonadministrative

*Pseudonym

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staff member whose role, ironically, is to advocate for students and assist in the process of mediation.

One day later, Michael was back in school. Two staff welcomed him back and encouraged him to continue to come to school. Then Michael went to gym class. According to Michael, he was standing with a group of students and the PE teacher told them to be quiet, and specifically told Michael to "shut up." Michael said, "I don't like being talked to that way: it's not respectful." The teacher replied, "Get out into the hall." Michael replied with a swear word. Subsequently, he was suspended again for a day by the assistant principal.

While efforts are being made to mediate the power struggle between Michael, his teacher, and the assistant principals, Michael is losing the battle. He is missing school and moving one step closer to dropping out.

Dropping out of school is now recognized as a critical educational problem. School dropouts are a significant cost to our educational system, to social programs, and to our nation as a world competitor. Reducing the occurrence of dropping out is identified as one of the eight educational goals for our nation. When we look at dropout rates today, we find that the problem is particularly great among youth with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities.

■ Issue: Framing the Dropout Problem

The dropout problem exists throughout the United States, but it is worse in some areas and among some populations of students. High risk areas include the southern and western regions of the country, and large urban centers. High risk populations include youth who are from low-income households, non-European American backgrounds, single parent families, and/or have disabilities. When analyses control for differences in "high risk", such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, youth with disabilities appear to be at greatest risk for school failure. Regardless of how the dropout rate is calculated, whether following a class of students over a few years or examining a particular age group, students with disabilities leave school without graduating at much higher rates than other students (see Table 1). In a study commissioned to follow youth with disabilities, Wagner and colleagues (1992) found that youth with emotional/behavioral or learning disabilities left school before graduation at higher rates than other students in special education; approximately 59% of the students with emotional/behavioral disabilities and 36% of those with learning disabilities dropped out of school within a two-year period.

Table 1: Dropout Rates for Youth (%)

Study	Without Disability	With Disability
Marder & D'Amico (1992)	32	41
Wagner et al. (1992)	21	37
McMillen et al. (1993)	10	20

What Are the Effects of Dropping Out of School?

Dropping out of school has serious implications for youth and for the social stability and economic development of this country. Recent reports indicate that youth who drop out of school experience what Lizbeth Schorr refers to as "rotten" outcomes, such as unemployment, underemployment, and incarceration. School dropouts report unemployment rates as much as 40% higher than youth who have completed school. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study of special education students, the arrest rates of youth with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities who have dropped out are significantly higher than the rates for youth in the general population who have dropped out. The arrest rates for dropouts three to five years after high school are alarming. Of students with emotional/behavioral disorders, 73% of those who dropped out are arrested within three to five years as compared to 35% of those who graduated. For students with learning disabilities, 62% of those who drop out are arrested compared with 15% of those who graduate. Given that taxpayers spend approximately $51,000 per year to incarcerate just one person compared to approximately $11,500 to educate one child with a disability, these statistics have tremendous implications for social service costs in our nation.

What Do We Know About Dropouts and Models of School Engagement?

Very little research has focused on students with disabilities. And, most approaches to explaining the dropout problem have placed the blame on the student who has dropped out (or on characteristics of the student's background, such as ethnicity), rather than looking at contributing factors in the school and community. From dropout models and research on risk factors we know that:

- Dropouts are not a homogeneous population. Youth drop out of school for a variety of reasons and influencing circumstances (see Table 2 for types of dropouts).
- Dropouts are highly mobile, not only moving in and out of school, but moving from school to school and neighborhood to neighborhood.

- Dropout models are primarily explanatory. They describe the problem, but do not necessarily point to ways to prevent students from dropping out of school.
- Most dropout models assume that youth actively decide to drop out of school. Actually, many students find themselves slowly pushed out of school with no understanding of how to get back into a suitable educational program.

Table 2 : Types of Dropouts

Types of Dropouts	Definitions
Capable Dropout	... youth whose family socialization is inconsistent with school demands.
Disaffiliate	... youth who no longer wishes to be associated with school.
Educational Mortality	... youth failing to complete a program.
Pushout	... youth who is expelled or suspended.
Stayout	... youth who never returns after dropping out the first time.
Stopout, Returnee, Drop-in	... youth who returns to school, usually in the same academic year.

Source: George Morrow (1986); Mary Frase (1989)

The description of the dropout types alludes to the mobility experienced by many of these youth. A lack of continuity attributed to moving in and out of school is often coupled with movement from school to school, changes in special education status, or residential mobility. Our work in an urban middle school setting revealed that only 37% of one cohort of students remained in the same school during their middle school years. Of those students generally considered to be in greatest need of stability - that is, youth with emotional/behavioral disabilities - only 16% stayed in the same school during middle school.

Conceptual models offer a framework for understanding the school dropout problem. Generally these models are based on large pre-existing data sets. The numerous correlates of dropping out are organized into major categories, derived from either a logical or empirical process. Of the models that do exist, most are flawed by one of two shortcomings. First, most models do not tell us what should be done to reduce the number of dropouts. Secondly, dominant components of the models are characterized by factors that schools have little control over, such as the student's socio-economic status.

A model that is more likely to guide intervention and policy development has been proposed by Jeremy Finn (1993). His Participation-Identification Model emphasizes: (1) participation in school activities, (2) successful performance outcomes, and (3) identification with school. Finn describes the act of dropping out as a long process of disengagement. A student's connection with school is visualized along a continuum, the end point of which would be dropping out. The fundamental difference between Finn's model and previous models is his emphasis on "behavioral risk factors" - failing to attend classes, complete assignments, or pass classes - rather than "status risk factors" such as, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. While status risk factors are commonly used to describe and predict school dropouts, they really only inform us about contextual differences among students. Status factors are less amenable to manipulation than behavioral risk factors, which can be modified by school staff, family members, and students themselves.

The basic premise of the Finn model is that participation in school activities is essential in order for positive outcomes to be realized and for students to identify with school and school related goals. A student is described as likely to remain engaged and to complete school if the student believes that she or he belongs to and shares common values with the school. According to the model, the majority of students who drop out are expressing an extreme sense of alienation or disengagement that most likely was preceded by many behavioral indicators of withdrawal and unsuccessful school experiences. In one of the few studies that has directly asked students why they dropped out of school, youth reported reasons that are quite similar to known antecedents of early school withdrawal: did not like school, poor grades, offered job and chose to work, getting married, could not get along with teachers, had to help support family (either financially or by providing day care to siblings), pregnancy, and expelled or suspended. These responses tend to support Finn's notion that incidences of course failure, suspension, and mismatch between school and family values be conceptualized as primary indicators of disengagement or risk of dropping out and as problems to target for policy reform and prevention practices.

■ Issue: Government Policies on Dropouts

Two initiatives at the federal level directly address the dropout problem: (1) the establishment of a national goal regarding graduation rates, and (2) mandated reporting requirements to ascertain the extent of the dropout problem. The national goal to increase the graduation rate has been signed into law and other groups, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, have embraced the challenge of a 100% graduation rate by the year 2000.

The second initiative, a mandate that schools document and report student exit status, can be traced to two

legislative Acts. The 1988 Hawkins-Stafford Amendments to the Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act (PL 100-297) mandates the National Center for Education Statistics to collect and report dropout rates to Congress on an annual basis. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments 1983 (PL 98-199) and 1986 (PL 99-457) requires the Secretary of Education to report the exit status of youth by disability category and age. Reporting mandates, however, are only as good as the data reported.

What Dropout Rate is the "Right" Number?

A close look at dropout statistics reveals quite a bit of variability in the numbers being cited. A study conducted by Michelle Fine (1987) exemplifies one aspect of the reporting problem. One would assume, for example, an increase in the graduation rate would have a relative inverse effect on the dropout rate. Without guidelines dictating the formula to be used to measure students' exiting status from school, however, the calculations can be manipulated to produce almost any result. Fine conducted a study to examine why urban students drop out of high school. Following a cohort of students beginning in ninth grade, she reported that 66% of the students had dropped out by the end of twelfth grade. At the same time, the principal of the school was reporting that 80% of the graduates go on to college. In fact, both of these statistics are true. The principal was reporting figures based on the number of students enrolled at the beginning and end of the twelfth grade and emphasized the information about the graduates (i.e., an event rate). Fine reported figures based on the number of students enrolled at the beginning of ninth grade and the end of twelfth grade and emphasized the information about the dropouts (i.e., a cohort rate). It is quite apparent that the inferences alluded to by these two statistics raise very different images of the school's holding power when presented in isolation.

Reconciling definitional and analytical discrepancies is critical if we are to understand and address the dropout problem. First, it is important to understand that different types of dropout rates produce distinctly different numbers (see Table 3). For example, the event rate is typically much smaller than the cohort rate. In large urban cities, a typical event dropout rate is 10-15% while a typical cohort dropout rate is 25-50%. Both numbers are correct, but each represents a different time span or different slice of the student population.

Furthermore, variations in the operational definitions used by local educational agencies result in some students being excluded from the count while others are not. One group of students classified in discrepant ways are those working on a General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Based on an analysis of the dropout definitions and formulas used by 21 states, Patricia Williams (1987) identified five major sources of variation: (1) grade levels used in calculating rates, (2) ages of students who can be classified as dropouts, (3) accounting period for calculating rates, (4) time period for unexplained absence, and (5) acceptable alternative educational settings. She also found that resistance to using a uniform method of assessment was due to such reasons as technical incompatibility, financial constraints, and sheer opposition. Until we can get agreement on a single definition, best practice is to have every citation of a dropout rate be accompanied by notation on the type of dropout rate being reported and the actual definition used to classify the exit status of students.

Table 3: Dropout Rate Statistics

Types	Definitions
Event Rates	... measure the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school (i.e., annual or incidence rates).
Status Rates	... measure the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out (i.e., prevalence rates).
Cohort Rates	... measure what happens to a single group (or cohort) of students over a period of time (i.e., longitudinal rates).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (1993)

Government Dropout Policies for Youth with Disabilities

In 1990, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) established a task force for the improvement of data on school exit status. The task force was concerned about the quality of exit status data and the comparability of student exiting figures used by OSEP and other federal agencies, such as the Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation. In 1991, the task force published a report that identified the major discrepancies between dropout definitions and calculation formulas used across the major reporting agencies and outlined a set of final recommendations to improve data quality and compatibility. Two of the recommendations that were adopted have resulted in more compatible statistics on dropout rates and refinement of the OSEP exit categories used in reporting on students with disabilities.

In conjunction with the establishment of the task force, OSEP funded three projects (in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Seattle) to develop interventions to support junior high school and middle school students with learning or

emotional/behavioral disabilities. These are students with the highest dropout rates. The rationale for providing interventions before high school was that high school interventions were already too late for those students who had already dropped out or had disengaged to such a degree that typical prevention strategies were no longer feasible. At the time the middle school projects were funded (1990), numerous intervention programs had been suggested for dropout-prone students without disabilities. Strategies explicitly targeting youth with disabilities had not been systematically examined. Thus, the middle school dropout prevention projects were designed specifically to target students with disabilities, and to reach them before high school. Staff from the three projects have been meeting on a regular basis to share ideas and common data, with the intention of increasing the strength of results through collaboration.

Are Educational Policies Alone Enough to Reach the Goal?

Establishing a national goal to increase the graduation rate and mandating educational agencies to report on their progress toward the goal are important first steps toward addressing the dropout problem. However, the dropout problem is not just an educational issue. Other factors contribute that fall outside of traditional educational roles. According to a national sample of secondary principals and superintendents of independent school districts (Hyle, Bull, Salyer & Montgomery, 1991), risk factors that should be given national priority include criminal/victimization (e.g., substance abuse, child abuse, involvement in crime, and illiteracy), home problems, lack of educational support, and truancy. Survey findings suggest that large scale decreases in dropout rates will not occur with school-based initiatives alone. It is clear that educational efforts must be coupled with a comprehensive package of economic and social reforms targeting employment, child care, birth control, housing, and health related issues. And with or without a network of resources to draw upon, educators must be supported in efforts to link with others to meet children's health and social needs as a way to improve school performance and outcomes.

■ Issue: Holding Power of School Policies

Although schools should not bear the total responsibility for increasing the percentage of youth who graduate from high school, students' exit status is an important indicator of educational program effectiveness. Schools must be held accountable for their role in formulating policies and practices that create a climate to foster all students' abilities to be successful and remain in school until graduation. In a country that prides itself on a commitment to equality of opportunity and the full participation of all citizens in political, social, and economic affairs, one would expect that our institutions and policies would reflect and promote this constitutional commitment.

"Holding power" refers to the ability to keep students engaged in school through graduation. According to Finn's model of school engagement, holding power would be measured in part by how much students are participating in school and the effect school policies have on students' participation. In a report titled, *The Way Out* (1986), Ann Wheelock examined the exclusionary practices of Boston middle schools. She depicted the process of student disengagement as a merry-go-round cycle of out-of-school suspension, repeating grades, in-school truancy (e.g., cutting classes, disruption), poor attendance, and school failure, including low teacher expectations. Wheelock argued that in order to slow down the merry-go-round, school policies and practices should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they encourage full participation or exacerbate the school dropout phenomenon.

Four school policies that are prone to being exclusionary in practice are: discipline procedures, attendance and grade retention policies, academic standards, and failure to establish home-school collaboration.

How Do School Discipline Procedures Affect Holding Power?

Discipline procedures, which include out-of-school suspension, are cited often by youth as a reason for their disengagement from school. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) examined the *High School and Beyond* study responses from non-college-bound stay-ins and students who dropped out. They found that the dropouts' perceptions of school were consistently more negative on items related to the effectiveness and fairness of school discipline. Rules on the consequences of unacceptable behavior are often rigid and overly punitive. It is not uncommon practice, for example, to suspend a student for repeatedly being late to class or for not having gym clothes. The obvious hazard of out-of-school suspension is that it directly impedes a student's opportunity to attend school and can be characterized as "pushing" students out the door. Still, many administrators and teachers cling to an authoritarian style of control. Concerns about safe schools and control over student behaviors help to sustain intractable discipline policies. Yet, many other disciplinary approaches, based on behavior management and conflict management research, are less likely to contribute to the dropout problem. High suspension rates must be viewed as an indictor of a disorderly climate. In such a climate, according to Ann Wheelock, "school staff have failed to

communicate compelling reasons for student cooperation, teach self-discipline, or develop a school community that acknowledges the importance of meeting young adolescents' normal developmental needs" (p. 59).

How Do School Attendance and Grade Retention Policies Affect Holding Power?

Attendance and grade retention policies often are exclusionary in practice. Of particular concern are school policies that have automatic consequences for absenteeism, such that unexcused absences result in automatic course failure, out-of-school suspension, or non-promotion to the next grade. While such practices are quite common, they contribute to high dropout rates. In a review of 14 court cases on automatic grade and credit reduction, Sperry (1990) found that schools remained inflexible and held to their attendance policies even after the nature of the consequences were made apparent. The most damaging attendance policies are those that do not allow students to advance to the next grade as a consequence of high absenteeism. Grade retention is largely a response to policy guidelines to hold back youth for remediation who show academic discrepancies, including course failure. Yet, non-promotion is a variable found to correlate highly with incidences of dropping out. Studies have found that repeating one grade increased the risk of dropping out later by 40 - 50%; repeating two grades increased that risk by 90%. Considering that retention appears to be more detrimental and usually ineffective at remediation, perhaps "social promotions" coupled with some attempt to remediate would be a less hazardous option for youth at risk for dropping out of school.

How Does the Push for Higher Academic Standards Affect Holding Power?

The call for higher academic standards may have unanticipated consequences for some students if no intervening support is provided. McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) expressed their concerns about policies that dictate more rigorous content, greater learning time, and high levels of achievement. The possibility was raised that these changing policies might lead to higher dropout rates. Among the issues to consider are the following:

- Changes in curriculum may lead to greater academic stratification, which could systematically exclude or isolate youth receiving special education services as well as youth characterized as "low-achieving" from the mainstream academic classes or programs.
- More demanding time requirements in school may lead to more conflicts between school and other demands placed on students, such as wage-earning responsibilities.
- Requirements calling for higher levels of achievement may lead to more students failing classes, which also correlates highly with incidences of dropping out.

Unless additional assistance is provided to youth at-risk of academic failure to accommodate for the higher academic demands, major educational reform proposals will likely result in unintended increases in student disengagement from school, including dropping out.

How Does Home-School Collaboration Affect Holding Power?

Policies and practices to involve parents in school can be exclusionary if they do not include strategies to reach out to all families. Families likely to be excluded are those without phones, those with a new address every month, those who cannot read, those without transportation, and those whose children are at risk for school failure. Families are an important component of the solution to the problem of students leaving school without life-relevant skills. There is substantial evidence across grade and income levels to show that when parents are involved in education, students have higher grades and test scores and better long-term academic achievement. Student attendance, attitudes about school, self-concept, and behavior improve when parents are involved. Furthermore, several studies have shown that suspensions and truancy are reduced when parents and educators work together to achieve educational goals. Based on a review of over 150 articles examining the relationship between family factors and student achievement, Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney (1992) concluded that the effect of the home environment on student learning can no longer be ignored in educational interventions.

When considering home support for learning, equity is a key issue. Some children receive more home support for learning than others. A critical variable for student success is the degree to which continuity between home and school expectations and interaction patterns about educational performance exists. It has been shown that parents wait to be directed by educators and want educators to provide them with information about schooling.

Despite the robust knowledge base that supports the notion of the family as America's smallest school, home-school partnerships for learning are not the norm. There is much more rhetoric than reality about home-school collaboration, and attempts to align schools more closely with the cultures of their students and families are still relatively rare in American public education.

Specific factors support or impede the ability of parents of high-risk students to get involved, including: parents' educational capabilities; mobility of the family and/or student; incongruent views about the appropriate division of

labor between parents and teachers; information parents have about their child's schooling; and the time, money, and other resources in the home. Essential principles for involving parents of high-risk students, often who are low income and minority, have been identified through the significant work of Joyce Epstein and Don Davies, Co-directors of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, U.S. Department of Education. Successful policies and practices are those that reach out to all parents and promote opportunities for low-income families to recognize their strengths, set their own agendas, and make constructive changes in their lives. Schools must change their practices, and policies must empower schools to do so. As long as schools involve parents in traditionally oriented ways (e.g., print materials, volunteering), they will continue to reach only those parents whose practices and philosophies are congruent with the school. Under these conditions, social class will continue to be a differentiating variable as to which parents are involved in education.

Creating a collaborative ethic between home and school, parents and educators, requires new definitions. Parent refers to a significant adult in a child's life, which may be an older sibling, aunt or uncle, grandparent, or friend. New directions in home-school collaboration, especially in urban education, ensure that parents act as advocates and decision makers in the school and that they are seen as key resources to improve their own children's education and the schooling of all children. New directions in collaborative programs from preschool to high school are based in empowerment to foster the parent role as advocate and decision maker. A program empowers parents when its content is responsive to family needs, when it affords parents opportunities to contribute successfully to their children's developmental and academic progress, when it values parent commitments and contributions, and when it views parents as active peers and not passive clients.

■ Current Approaches to Dropping Out

A variety of approaches that range from alternative learning structures, to supervised work experience, to any number of supplemental services are described in the dropout literature. Suggestions are abundant, but detailed descriptions of program components, implementation procedures, and evaluation of outcomes are scarce. Most programs cited in the literature target high school students. A portion of the programs are reentry programs that emphasize employment-oriented services and GED preparation; they often operate in alternative settings. Fewer programs at the early childhood and elementary level are intentionally focusing on dropout prevention, although an outcome of early intervention may be a reduction in dropout rates. The majority of the programs can be described as falling somewhere between prevention (i.e., addressing factors known to be predictors) and reentry remediation (i.e., alleviating or correcting the problem). Waiting until high school to intervene is often too late for those students who have already dropped out or who have disengaged to such a degree that prevention is no longer possible.

What are the General Education Approaches to the Dropout Problem?

An extensive literature review on dropout prevention strategies by Wolman and associates (1989) categorized current practices and programs into four groups:

- **Instructional-Academic [school structure] Related.** Refers to an individualized approach to teaching and learning, flexible in curriculum and school hours, basic skills instruction, low student-teacher ratios, development of alternative educational programs and settings, greater training of staff, and enforcement of attendance policies.
- **Economic-Work Related.** Refers to vocational education, employment preparation and job training, help with job search, community-based work experience, and financial incentives to stay in school.
- **Personal-Affective Related.** Refers to individualized psychological support such as counseling, personal development and improvement of self-esteem, positive climate and supportive peer culture, and staff commitment to being caring and supportive.
- **Social Services and Health Needs.** Refers to health care and family planning, child care, prenatal care and parent support services.

This information is based primarily on programs for students in general education programs.

Although numerous intervention programs for dropout-prone students who do not have special needs have been suggested, programs explicitly targeting youth with disabilities have not been studied systematically. Naomi Zigmond (1987) suggests that a probable reason for the limited amount of research on special education dropouts is probably due to the fact that many of the elements and strategies that compose dropout prevention programs already are a part of special education programs. Among the shared components are: early identification, an individualized approach, smaller size classes, lower pupil-teacher ratios, vocational education, employment preparation and job training, and counseling.

Dropout Prevention Designed for Special Education

Research on special education dropouts is beginning to accumulate. The Partnership for School Success dropout prevention project in Minneapolis, one of the three funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, has initiated a monitoring and school engagement procedure to address the risk of school withdrawal. A user-friendly system for monitoring risk factors and then making connections with students did not exist in the school, in Minneapolis, nor was it obvious how to make it exist through the use of existing computerized information on absenteeism, tardiness, and suspensions. The lack of a strategy for moving from "problem admiration" to intervention probably reinforced the student perception that no one cared about their increasing "disconnectedness."

The Check and Connect monitoring and school engagement procedure was designed in part to facilitate the continuous assessment of student levels of engagement in school. This is referred to as the "check" part of the procedure. Incidence of suspension or absenteeism, along with other behavioral indicators of alienation, are monitored for daily incidences through the use of a monitoring sheet. Six indicators of risk are monitored for daily incidence of occurrence. Risk is defined by the number of incidences per month for each risk category. These were set by a school task force of administrators, teachers, and project staff. The indicators and levels determined to be high risk are:

- **Absenteeism**. Occurrence of absence; reason (excused/unexcused). Days suspended are included, but are also monitored separately. High Risk: Four or more incidences per month.
- **Tardiness**. Occurrence of tardiness, defined as arriving late for class. High Risk: Five or more incidences per month.
- **Out-of-School Suspension**. Occurrence of suspension, length of suspension, reason for suspension, referring teacher. High Risk: Two or more days suspended per month.
- **In-School Suspension**. Occurrence of suspension, reason, period of suspension, referring teacher. High Risk: Two-four or more incidences per month, depending on the school (the criteria vary by school because in-school suspension is used differently in each setting).
- **Behavior Referral(s)**. Occurrence of referral, reason, period of referral, referring teacher. High Risk: Four or more referrals per month.
- **Failing Class(es)**. Occurrence of Fs or Ds, course subject, semester basis. High Risk: Two or more Ds, or one or more Fs per semester.

When the sheet for an individual target student indicates increased risk, efforts are initiated to reconnect the student to school. This is referred to as the "connect" part of the procedure. Certain "core" connect interventions are administered to all students regardless of their level of risk or disengagement. Additional interventions are brokered for students showing "high risk" in relation to any of the six indicators being monitored. The four core interventions are:

- Sharing general information with the student about the monitoring system.
- Providing regular feedback to the student.
- Regularly discussing the importance of staying in school.
- Problem-solving with the student regarding risk factors.

General information initially is shared with the student about the monitor's role and the purpose of the monitoring sheets. Students then are regularly given feedback on their progress in school in general and in relation to risk factors. Each student is asked directly about the importance of staying in school. Additional "facts" are added to the student's responses about the economics of staying in school. The final, and significant, component involves problem-solving with students about risk factors and staying in school. Students are guided through real and/or hypothetical problems using a five step cognitively oriented problem-solving strategy. For example, the risk factor "attendance" would be reviewed by talking about the consequences of skipping school or by generating lists of strategies students use to get to school every day. The conversation is structured around the five step plan:

- Step 1. Stop. Think about the problem.
- Step 2. What are some choices?
- Step 3. Choose one.
- Step 4. Do it.
- Step 5. How did it work?

While this problem-solving strategy appears in various forms, the specific wording was modified from material developed by Braswell and Bloomquist (1991) to incorporate more concrete language.

Beyond these four core interventions are an array of supplemental supports. For students who are showing high risk, supplemental connect strategies are implemented based on individual student needs. Often, these involve connecting a student with a tutor or mentor, helping parents access social services, getting students involved in after-school activities, and so on. The five-step plan is used immediately to collaboratively problem-solve with the student and other key stakeholders (teachers, school staff, parents) using the

non-blaming interactions and problem solving family-school meeting strategies described by Weiss and Edwards (1992). The emphasis on the problem-solving process provides the conceptual framework for prevention activities. It systematically invites students to plan and manage their own problems, and build competencies that will allow them to constructively resolve conflicts in the future that may otherwise result in destructive consequences (e.g., dropping out of school).

The Check and Connect procedure is facilitated by a monitor whose role is similar to that of a mentor. The monitor meets regularly with the student and helps the student develop and maintain successful school habits, such as attending regularly and completing assignments. The strategies used by the monitors are more individualized for high-risk students than the core connect strategies delivered to all students, but can be summarized as either focusing on communication among key stakeholders including the student or on accessing services for students with disabilities.

■ Recommendations

We know that youth with learning and behavioral disabilities are at highest risk for dropping out of school. The consequences of school failure come at considerable cost to both the youth and to society. Based upon this review, six recommendations are presented:

- **Pay now or pay more later.** We need to invest in our youth now. Dropping out of school has serious implications for youth and for the social stability and economic development of this country. Reports indicate that youth who drop out of school experience "rotten" outcomes including unemployment or underemployment, criminal activity, and violence. The statistics have tremendous implications for social service costs to our nation and to taxpayers.
- **Federal policies must address the big picture.** The dropout problem is not just an educational issue, nor can it be fixed by federal educational policy alone. School-based initiatives must be coupled with a comprehensive package of economic and social reforms targeting employment, child care, birth control, housing, and health-related issues. Too many children slip through the cracks and struggle alone because of weak linkages and fragmented service delivery among health, education, and social services.
- **School policies and practices must be evaluated on the basis of holding power.** School level policies and practices should be evaluated on the basis of whether they help keep students in school - both physically and mentally. Administrators are urged to revise school policies and eliminate practices that serve to push students out of school. The measure of a school's holding power should include not only dropout rates, but also the intermediate warning signs of school withdrawal. These warning signs or antecedents to dropping out of school include absenteeism, tardiness, suspension, behavior referrals, and course failures.
- **Youth with disabilities must be included in the big picture.** While research indicates that youth with disabilities drop out of school at twice the rate of their general education peers, they represent a smaller portion of the population. From a purely numerical standpoint, most students who drop out of school are of European American background, from English-speaking two-parent families, do not have any children, and do not have a disability. Based on this information, it has been suggested by the authors of *Reaching the Goals* for Goal 2 that youth with disabilities and other minority groups be given secondary consideration: "... even a dramatic improvement in the graduation rates of those [traditionally disadvantaged] groups would have little impact on the nation's progress toward meeting Goal 2 because these groups are relatively small.... Consequently, if we are to make substantial progress toward a high school graduation rate of 90%, the dropout rate for "mainstream" white students must be substantially reduced (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993, p. 23). Unfortunately, attitudes such as these just serve to perpetuate the disproportionate gap in graduation rates among the "traditionally disadvantaged" portions of the school age population.
- **Prevention strategies must focus on school engagement through a comprehensive, individualized approach.** School policies and programs should be aligned to reinforce each student's connection with school and successful school habits such as attending regularly, coming to class prepared, completing assignments, passing classes, and so on. Systematically monitoring these behaviors and responding in a timely manner to warning signs of risk is critical. It is believed that a singular approach to preventing students from dropping out is insufficient; multicomponent strategies are needed. We know that youth drop out of school for various reasons and that school dropouts are a heterogeneous group. It is essential that strategies intended to keep students engaged in school meet the individualized needs of each learner in a timely fashion.
- **Prevention programs should be developed through a collaborative effort of home, school and community.** The dropout problem is not just an educational issue. The solution to the problem lies in the pooled strength of families, schools, communities and the youth themselves,

through shared responsibilities and a shared sense of accomplishment. It is believed that no one constituency can increase a school's holding power by itself. A systematic planning process for involving representatives of key stakeholders is recommended. The participation of family, community, and school representatives in the planning and implementation process has been suggested by the research on dropout prevention and the process of change to be critical for success. In his book, *Education Through Partnership*, Seeley (1985) contends that the product of education - learning - is not produced by schools, but by students with the support of teachers, parents, peers, and community.

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